

and geography. The Company team which made first contact with the lost colony has likewise been winnowed by the virus, and the surviving women are now in quarantine on the planet's surface. Marghe, an anthropologist, has been sent by the Company to try and solve the mystery, fortified with an experimental vaccine against the virus. The Company wants to use Jeep for whatever it is worth and get out; Marghe has already been used by the Company, and is determined not to be betrayed again.

The solution does not come through scientific method: in this at least *Ammonite* is true to its traditions. Rather, it comes through insight and experience won during Marghe's forced trek across the world after she loses contact with the Company base and is captured by a warlike nomadic tribe. Marghe escapes the tribe and the attentions of a near-psychotic tribeswoman who has fixated upon her, crosses a bitter winter landscape and is rescued, near death, by the women of a small settlement. She deliberately stops taking her vaccine, survives the ravages of the virus, and through the teaching of the wise woman who cares for her learns how two women may quicken babies in each other. And more, she learns how to read the world. By taking the world – or its avatar, the virus – into herself, she is enlightened. She takes the wise woman as a lover, chooses to become pregnant, and travels around the world to the Company base just in time to avert a battle between the nomads and the stranded Company security forces.

All of this sounds more exciting than it often is, especially for the first 200 pages or so, which is to say about half the novel. There is little actual plot, in terms of tangling events towards a crisis and a resolution, although that does happen, eventually, but instead there are great dreamy stretches of description of a world that is really not much stranger than ours. Nor is Griffith free of the vice of dramatizing a character's conflict through long, agonized, internalized arguments that do more to demonstrate the author's uncertainty than drive the plot forward. As a result, neither Marghe nor the leader of the surviving Company team (who shares some of the narrative weight) seem very sure of themselves, to the point that the reader often wonders when Marghe, who after all is a trained anthropologist, will actually start asking questions.

But the patient reader will be rewarded. Slowly, the novel begins to pay off. The territory it has covered, which at first glance is the territory covered in other rite-of-passage/travelogue/lost colony/biological-mystery novels from Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness* through Gentle's *Golden Witchbreed*, is revealed to be deeper

and richer than we'd thought. It is reclaimed, and with a vengeance, just as other echoes – such as the base commander's penchant for engaging in formal duelling matches after hard decisions (cf almost any Heinlein character, most especially in *Starship Troopers*) – are reclaimed and radicalized. All this is fine, but finer still is Griffith's ability to make us forget, not that every character is a woman, but the absence of men. In this she makes her world anew.

Infection is the metaphor of our age: for all our *hubris*, we are still flesh, and viruses remind us that although we think we have conquered the world, we are still irredeemably of it. Sf would have it otherwise, of course. In Kevin J. Anderson's and Doug Beason's **Assemblers of Infinity** (Bantam Books, \$4.99) the infective agent is a virulent alien nanotechnology intent on not only infecting our bodies but dismantling them – but because this is an sf novel, *hubris* will out.

A mysterious structure on the Moon is found to have been made by bacteria-sized assemblers which are soon loose amongst the human colonists. The Lunar scientists and engineers, infected and apparently doomed, race to control the assemblers and to understand the purpose of the vast structures they have created. In short, it's a first-contact novel, traditional hard sf which uses extrapolation of up-to-the-minute technology to retool well-worn clichés. The futile attempts to contain the alien infection, for instance, echo those in *The Andromeda Strain* (and the purpose of the structures created by the assemblers is similar to that of the radio signals in *A for Andromeda*). The behaviour of the assemblers, which threaten to render everything down to a grey sludge, is topologically identical to that of the transcendently smart gene-engineered bacteria of *Blood Music*, most especially in a hermetic sub-plot in which untutored assemblers get loose in an Antarctic Research Base (an echo within an echo, in that we are reminded of the setting of *The Thing*), only to be destroyed by containment procedures before they do anything more than twist a couple of people into bizarre shapes.

And so on. Core sf consists of retold tales redressed with new metaphors. *Assemblers of Infinity* is core sf and knows it: fast-paced, efficiently told, populated by stock characters distinguished only by clip-on tags or quirks. Its agenda is that of the dominant (white American male) sf culture, which is to demonstrate that anything the Universe throws at humankind can be tamed by *illuminati* armed with appropriate technology. It domesticates infinity.

Graham Joyce's first novel, *Dream-side*, was a chimera: part horror, part fantasy, and fleshed out of solidly based speculation upon the nature of the act of dreaming. His second, **Dark Sister** (Headline, £15.99), follows the standard genre trajectory and Faustian morality of a horror novel, but is also an engaging and sympathetic examination of the empowerment of women through witchcraft.

Maggie Sanders and her husband discover an old journal hidden in the chimneypiece of a boarded-up fireplace, and Maggie finds herself identifying with its writer, Bella, a novice witch. She starts to test the journal's herbal lore, and Bella's story, developing in the journal like a photograph, parallels her own as she is drawn deeper into witchcraft. As her husband's archaeological excavation slowly uncovers evidence of Bella's grisly fate, Maggie's dabbings increasingly threaten not only her, but also her children and her marriage. Her new power reveals her husband's infidelity, and when she tries to use that same power against him, this misuse draws down not only Bella's restless spirit, but also that of Bella's dark sister, who seeks vengeance for the breaking of a chain of inherited power.

Joyce never tries for any *Grand Guignol* effect – he's a subtler writer than the blood'n'guts'n'rock'n'roll school. The power of his fantasy lies not so much in the power of his imagination, but in his careful evocation of the commonplace. In fact, his depiction of the banality of domesticity and of Maggie's flight from a marriage that increasingly seems like a trap, done with a fine eye for the telling detail, is more believable than the witchy manifestations of the dark sister's power (significantly, often in the form of *stains*). The result is a well-told, mature, cosily English horror novel, with an old-fashioned morality driving its intersecting arcs of personal and externalized crises, and a good deal of sentiment informing its ending.

Also Noted:

Some short stories. Gardner Dozois has by now won so many awards for editing *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* that it is easy to forget that he is also a formidable writer. **Geodesic Dreams** (St Martin's Press, \$19.95) collects together a selection of his short fictions to remind us. They are carefully crafted variations of themes which are the common currency of sf – the End of the World tale, the Alien Invasion tale, The End of the World as Seen from a Bar tale – told with a polished literary fluency, from the heart.

Scott Bradfield's first short story collection, *The Secret Life of Houses*, was republished in the U.S. as *Dream of the Wolf*, with extra stories included.

Pan-at-lee's heavy fist bounced off the side of his head, knocking him down. When he got back to his feet, shaking his head, dizzy, she hit him again, rolling him in the dust. "Mama!" he gasped.

"Bad!" She snarled. "Bad, bad boy!" Coming closer, lifting her fists. Behind her, the Low Women closed in, stamping and chanting, and Om-at realized they were going to kill him. He rolled hard, getting out of Pan-at-lee's path, got to his feet and ran away into the darkness.

The four of them were sitting together the next morning beside the river, not far from the old camp, dazed and silent, when Ta-den strolled out of the bushes, tall, eyes bright, unmarked by fear. He squatted, clapping Om-at on the shoulder, squeezing slightly with his fingers. "Om-at."

Om-at patted him on the hand, still miserable, though he was glad to see his friend.

Ta-den smiled at the others and said, "Adenen-yo," waving a hand to include them all.

Odd. Ta-den hadn't been involved in last night's events, could go home any time he wanted to. He said, "Ta-den. Camp. O-lo-a. Guest-gift." A long and tiring sequence of thoughts. But it was the right thing to do. The rest of them, cast out of the tribe, would soon die, all alone in the wilderness.

Ta-den smiled and shook his head. "Om-at. Ta-den. Adenen-yo."

Om-at gave him an intense look. Across the way, under his own little bush, Pan-sat suddenly burst out sobbing, face hidden behind his hands. "People," he whispered. "Food."

It was true. This little band would not be able to survive on what small game it could catch. And only females knew how to find the food-plants that sustained them. Om-at didn't know if you could even live on just meat by itself. Lions did. So did dogs. Most things lived on plants, or, like waz-ho-don, mostly plants.

Ta-den nodded and, with a mournful look, said, "People. Sex."

That too. They were just five males, unless they wanted to find out just what Lu-don had gotten out of poor Pan-sat, whose predicament had caused this whole situation. Om-at felt a flash of anger. It had been Lu-don's fault, not Pan-sat. "Food," he said. "Women."

Pan-sat looked up. "Plants," he said.

Om-at twitched. *Plants*. That was a female magic word. He shrugged, looking around at a mass of undifferentiated vegetation. "Plants?" No. The magic word itself was not enough.

Ta-den tapped him on the shoulder. "Food," he said. "Tor-o-don. Plants. Female. Sex. Tor-o-don."

Om-at spent a moment remembering what they'd done to the tor-o-don female, then, suddenly, he gave Ta-den a very odd look. In addition to *looking* like waz-ho-don, the tor-o-don only ate plants.

Om-at sat by the riverbank examining his spoils, waiting for the others to finish mating with the two tor-o-don females they'd caught. Ordinarily, he would have joined in too, but the throbbing pain from his broken finger was just too much of a distraction. It had been a *stupid* way to get injured.

He'd been holding the male tor-o-don by the hair, expecting someone to bash in his head. Ta-den had complied, bringing the rock down right on top of Om-at's hand. The finger kept going crooked and it hurt when you pulled it straight again. Every time he winced, Ta-den would snicker.

Still, they would eat well tonight. The beefy male lay on his back, face crushed beyond recognition. Beside him lay a little pile of dead babies, rounded up, their necks broken. And, from the sounds the others were making, the females alone might be worth the price of a broken finger and a few painful bites.

The pile of stuff the tor-o-dons had been eating looked interesting enough, though it wasn't much like *real* food. A pile of little green seeds. Some coarse-looking yellow roots. A big, two-lobed nut. Om-at could remember having eaten something like this nut before. Not quite, but similar. You had to use a rock to break them open, then there was some soft, chewy stuff inside. He picked up one of the green seeds and tried to bite it. Crack. Ow! He felt his tooth, found a little divot where some of the enamel had flaked away. So much for that.

Now, the others were finished, were sitting beside the two terrified females, panting. Pan-sat grunted and got to his feet, picking up a rock with which he intended to brain them, adding to the already rather rich larder.

Om-at held up his hand. "No."

Pan-sat looked curious. "No?" Understanding grin. "Om-at. Sex." Gesturing at the females.

Om-at crawled over and patted one of the females on her crotch, which was damp just now. "Sex," he said. "Keep."

Pan-sat hefted the rock and said, "Food?"

"Sex."

Ta-den, who was standing over by the dead male, grinned. "Food," he said, nudging the carcass.

Om-at went over and knelt beside the little pile of nuts and whatnot. "Food." When Pan-sat gave him another odd look, he picked up one of the yellow roots, gingerly bit off a chunk, chewed and swallowed. It tasted pretty bad, but it went down all right.

Om-at was just getting back to camp, the half-grown antelope he and Ta-den had caught slung across his shoulders, taking his turn at carrying it, when one of the tor-o-don females gave birth. They had five of them now, one apiece. Caring for them took a lot of time, but the labour was easy to divide. Om-at and Ta-den still went out to hunt, now getting meat the males would eat themselves, while Pan-sat's ad-yo, never any good at hunting, herded the females on their daily forage-rounds. They were getting pretty good at picking up only those things that waz-ho-don liked to eat, eating the seeds they wanted right away.

Interested, Om-at dropped the antelope on the ground and went over to where the female squatted, wanting to watch. Among their own kind it had been impossible, Low Women gathering around the mother-to-be, drowning out her wails with their own grunting, chanting, stamping dance. Now there was no one to stop them from doing whatever they wanted.

A couple of the females had given birth after capture, squatting in the dust to grunt softly and drop